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VOICE ON THE SKIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

VOICE ON THE SKIN

By Sarah Elise Turner, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Sonya Clark
Chair, Craft/Material Studies Department

“The body can write on the skin from the inside—the soul, the mind, and the passions rise to the surface in boils, blushes, and rashes, and the invisible inside speaks by writing from the other side of the page”. —James Elkins

Skin not only covers but reveals what is behind it. I utilize its language as indicator of flaws and pathologies. I depict and manipulate this, not just as it already exists with the human body, but as projections of my psychological states onto inanimate objects.

Proposing that sight is a kind of touch, we touch with our minds, through memory, experience, and emotions. Empathetic looking involves projecting ourselves onto the objects as each simultaneously projects itself onto us.

Introduction: Repression as Impetus

The journey to the current stage of my work has been long and arduous. My explorations are and always have been based on representations of development and emotional states. Wading through the convoluted muck of identity, I aim to come to terms with what I pull from experience and history. I seek to capture fleeting feelings from the deep, dark places of the mind and give them the slightest whisper of permanence in hopes of gaining a sense of self-awareness. Inevitably, those notions are as fleeting as the feelings they represent.

I like to perceive my childhood as a happy one. This perception augments discomforts that creep into my mind and affect my working process. The story begins with my parents who grew up going through school together and married shortly after graduation from high school. I am the youngest of three children; I have a brother and sister. I lived in the same house my entire childhood and continue to consider it my home. As a child, I was an exuberant entertainer and basked in the attention my family gave me. My fantastical whims were accommodated. I seek answers to the point at which the confidence I held in my happy childhood began to waver. Rather I only find a faulty memory and my sense of self-awareness as disjointed as my feeble recollections of my young history.

My murky memory does not allow me to recall the point at which the perceived happiness began to fade. Pleasant times now seem to be complete constructions of my naïve hopes and expectations. The only definitive marker is the week before my tenth birthday when my parents' divorce became final. However, the years preceding the divorce only add to the confusion. My home's representation of stability and safety crumbled into disarray through the violent fights that resulted in strewn furniture and busted walls. Another definite in the explorations of my childhood memories is that no one in my family openly acknowledged or discussed the fighting and resultant divorce. The potentially painful memories are strangely subdued through the years of my family's collective repression. It is now the basic tenet that my familial associations are based on: painful shit happens and no talks about it. It compels my interest in denial versus failed recollections.

Memories are transient. They change through the act of recalling them. Each time a memory is summoned, it becomes less accurate. I find myself at a crossroads between an honest pursuit of self-knowledge and a complete lack of objectivity in my efforts. However futile an undertaking, my art making is cathartic from the delusional journey to the potential concrete self-awareness.

In this thesis, I investigate the subtle, gray areas of the mind as individuals cope psychologically with traumatic experience. I try to decipher my own reality through the coping mechanisms I have found in others. Events always leave marks behind: bruises on skin, marks upon walls, holes that compromise entire protective structures. In my art I look for the intersections between the past and present; seeking the points at which the

psychological and the physical markers of life's events meet. Throughout my time in graduate school, through the various media and aesthetics changes I took on, the central concept of my work is the dialogue between internal struggles and external vulnerabilities.

Development of Work

Before coming to graduate school, I had been creating singular ceramic sculptures intended to mark a specific moment in the fluctuation of bubbling emotion. Exploring a period of perceived rapid emotional growth, the pieces created are amorphous and blob-like. I referred to cells, fungi, or small organisms with the capability to grow and expand rapidly and enclosed burgeoning inner beings within complex networks of ceramic tubes. The tubular networks' negative spaces vary in complexity, obscuring the internal growth's visibility. As this body of work progressed, the internal blob was eventually consumed by its protection. The security of the tubes, once essential, ultimately stifled any potential prosperity for the inner being. My own restrictive allowance for vulnerability mirrored the thwarted emotional development of the metaphorical beings I created.



Figure 1: *Untitled*. 2006. Ceramic. 14x12x12".

Graduate school offered an opportunity to specify my interests. My initial inquiries were driven by a noted interest in intimacy. This preoccupation developed and the theme

continues to pervade my work: experiences can be comforting and beautiful by allowing the fortresses around one's insecurities to be penetrated. My scrutinization was aimed at the very structures that impede interpersonal connections. Walls protect us from extraneous interactions while inhibiting the potentiality of the realms beyond. Destruction would produce a resultant catastrophe through the disintegrated structural integrity.

In this work, a "skin" was pulled from the surface of the wall; points of tension evident, but the actual pulling force not visible. The structure is compromised slowly through unknown causes. Individuals may inadvertently enter situations exposing the susceptibility of one's emotional walls. At times when the most stalwart walls function



Figure 2: *Wall Skin*. 2008. Mixed Media. 5x8x1.5"

properly, minute manipulation in the structure may cause formidable, anomalous ramifications.

I maintain an interest in architectural space as a conceptual element to my work. However, at this point in my research, I longed to fill the absence of clay objects. Working with clay as a vehicle for my cathartic practice allows conveyance of the sense of sensuality and closeness I feel with the material and, therefore, can imbue conceptually. The material's slowness is a continuous struggle I persistently address and question. In the second semester of my first year, clay returned as a prominent material in my work.

After a series of wall skins, an excitement for the possibilities of work with abstract, bodily references spawned inquiry into several conceptual desires: depiction of an internal push and pull between longing to escape with complete exposure as well as a strong aversion to same. Work transitioned into quick studies using nylon stockings filled with sand, bound by and suspended with thin string.



Figure 3: *Nylon Study*. 2008. Nylons, Sand, Nails, String. 4x5x2”.

The studies were used for their sense of gravity, skin-like folds, and benign acceptance of fragile restraints. My preoccupation became capturing those natural conceptual references within singular ceramic objects only to discover I had already quintessentially achieved everything within the study.

As the ceramic objects I had made to embody the studies were not satisfying my goals, I decided to identify conspicuous, broad emotions to represent. The intent of “Curl” was a response to overstimulation and the need to be present for routine obligations, but an incessant urge to lie low, recoil, and acquiesce to life as a wrinkly, pathetic blob in a

corner—all for seemingly no reason at all. “Poke” is along the same lines; environmental agitations from intangible, irrepressible external forces are its primary stressors. It is covered in references to bodily orifices, points of entry for both intimate and invasive. Both pieces are approximately the scale of a human newborn to elicit the feeble, naïve states of a child’s openness to experience, without full comprehension of the ramifications.



Figure 4: *Curl*. 2009. Ceramic, Paint. 7x10x8”.



Figure 5: *Poke*. 2009. Ceramic, Paint. 7x9x5”.

The time for my candidacy review neared and I was dissatisfied with the emotional content my ceramic objects were to impart and elicit. Concurrently, I had been creating drawings such as the one shown in “Horse”. I was tracing the outlines of photographs of me and my father. Through the tracing process, portions of the lines of the images came through more clearly than others. I wanted to address the memory of that relationship; one of a

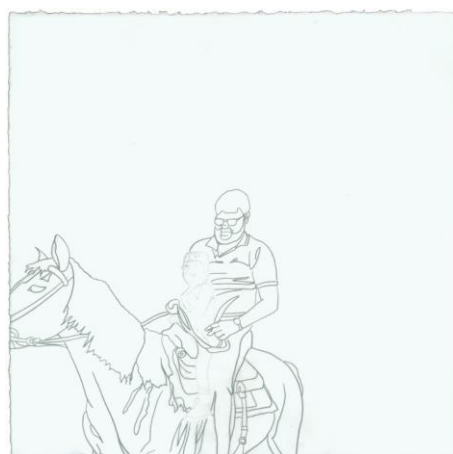


Figure 6: *Horse*. 2008. Graphite on Paper. 10x10”.

source of so much contention for me in the preceding years. I began an investigation into finding solace within retracing inherently hazy memories.

“Back When I was Your Daughter” was accompanied with the following text: “Now, I only wish I knew how to reverse back to being the person that made you proud... back when I was your daughter...I’ve got your nose and the color of your eyes.” The work revisits snapshots marking the years my father was present in my life. Preceded by three years of estrangement, my aim was to scrutinize the only tangible indicators of our relationship. My presumption was the snapshots could offer their secrets, their truths to the root of my discordant emotions regarding his absence. I proposed tracing their lines would lead to what my experiential memory cannot summon. However, the photographs form false moments which only exist within the depths of my imagination.

This work manifested in a site-specific drawing installation. Architectural space returns with elemental significance as the installation utilized the walls of a closet under stairs in the gallery. Using childhood drawing materials, the drawings were done in colored pencils, markers, and crayons. Relying on the scraping against the hollow wall and its resultant echo, my childhood closet was covered in frantic scribbles; efforts to drown the arguments between my parents. The newer, subdued closet space only



Figure 7: *Back When I was Your Daughter*. 2009. Mixed Media Drawing Installation. Dimensions Variable.

offers the sounds of footsteps and murmurs of non-threatening friends and strangers.

My facial expressions were not traced to add a sense that something within the pictured interaction is amiss; these are not innocent images, but indicators of deeper relational issues. Color was only added to the trivial portions that did not provide information for the types of interactions being documented in the shots. All of the images traced were projected onto the wall and the process allowed details, proportions, and the edges of the photographs to blur. Each choice aimed at creating an opportunity for the viewer to physically step into a private space; the emotional manifestations of a young woman revisiting incomprehensible bittersweet remnants of a dissipated relationship.



Figure 8: *Back When I Was Your Daughter*. Detail.



Figure 9: *Back When I Was Your Daughter*. Detail.

“Back When I Was Your Daughter” was a significant conceptual development with which to end my first year of graduate school. As it embodied thoughts on memory and one’s emotional maturity’s correlation to contributing conjunctures within one’s

development. All the year's endeavors were dejected acknowledgements of abandonment, abuse, and searching for self-awareness. The tensions lie with an individual in limbo with melancholic acceptance and faint optimism for the value of painful, yet formative ordeals. I resolved the diaristic, directly narrative nature of using of such personally charged material ultimately alienated most of my viewers from the intended empathetic reaction. This developmental diversion allowed me to return to abstraction and ceramic objects as vehicles for my narrative; this time emphasis was to be placed on a collective rather than an embodiment within a singular object.

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it.”
-Helen Keller

The works previously mentioned, “Curl” and “Poke”, were the basis of my investigations throughout my second year. I refer to this body of work as the “Poke Series”. Through my work I probe the subtleties of emotional development. I visualize and depict delicate emotions like oversensitivity, insecurity, and self-doubt while exaggerating their significance. I explore the places within myself—places of discomfort, of fear, of tenderness—and continuously seek the beauty within pain that I have found to be intrinsically linked with growth. In this series, I freeze moments and illicit indicators of raw, painful emotions through utilizing forms and surface treatments that reference areas of the body that are ambiguously familiar yet removed enough from actuality. Thus, I enable the work to be seen as an “other” and not pendanttically associated with our own human forms. It is important for my work to have its own visual language and separation from the

realistic limits of the human body's capabilities. The static forms I create have their own life stories from beginning to end.

The summer preceding my second year involved the creation of a series varying sizes of spheres. The spheres each have a “poke” or my depiction of a wound, scar, or bodily orifice. No matter which of those associations one could reach the point that each of the objects has been penetrated and the redness of the surface indicates irritation. Each of the objects represent moments, at times only trivial, yet painful experiences, that swell with varying degrees of severity. Additionally, each marks an event in one’s life which leads to recurring emotional turmoil though independent in its own source of distress. The individual relies on the conversation it has with the others; posing a potential comfort to the other experiences with which it converses.



Figure 10: *Poke Conversation (whispers)*. 2009. Ceramic, Paint, Beeswax. Dimensions variable.



Figure 11: *Poke Conversation (whispers)*. Detail.

I postulate each moment, primarily the negative, becomes an essential, beautiful fragment leading to one’s potential self-awareness.

As the “Poke Series” developed, the time spent with each object I created allowed for contemplation. The experience became intensely gratifying in the ability to lose the pain through detailed, delicate, obsessive work. Folds and wrinkles, taut bellies and sagging sacs—the abstractions are more strongly tied to the human form. The surfaces are more detailed as skin’s health indicators refer to emotional metaphors: varying intensities of red as rash-like irritation, pale yellows and blue for sallow sickliness, or yellowish-green as in festering infections. The form and surface both seduce and repulse. The viewer is a crucial element to the work at this point. The objects’ sense of movement is intended to suggest that they are attempting to escape the viewer’s scrutinization as well that the objects are seeking one another’s solace. All of these concerns are elemental to the overall experience I intend for the viewer: a twinge of empathy for these pathetic, grotesque yet alluring blobs.



Figure 12: *bloop*. 2009. Ceramic, Paint. **Figure 13: *shiver*.** 2009. Ceramic, Paint, Hair. 9x8x8". 15x8x8".

Thesis Work: Invert

This thesis work indicates my perception of emotional development at this point in my life and cannot remain my truth beyond this period. All of my developments feed its creation.

“We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present.”

- Anaïs Nin

This quote has stayed with me for years, even before I decided to pursue being an artist.

My work in this exhibition entitled, “Invert” is an installation of painful experiences that have been spawned by an initial traumatic moment which has been allowed to swell and reach gigantic proportions.

The largest piece within the installation is a primary experience; one that persists as it moves in and out of a healing process. It began small, feeble, and with appropriate care could have been healed years ago. Yet, neglected and repressed, it grew in size and severity. It is here where all other festering feelings began. I purport the smaller,



Figure 14: *Invert*. 2010. Installation view.

seemingly less significant, yet amazing potent trials of one's life are borne from a repressed experience. They all share commonalities even though each has its own impetus and life.

The fleshy beings are more carefully crafted than any others prior. Their weight, movement, and organic folds all elicit their emotional state. Some are small, fresh, energetic, and raw and are the youngest of the bunch. They have the potentiality to continue to swell and could spawn more pain which will refer to their own starts. The lifecycle of these beings is indefinite. Some will remain sensitive for long periods of time, growing all the while. Others will fade and completely dissipate before becoming



Figure 15: *Invert*. 2010. Installation view.

enormous burdens. Yet, each is significant as they are part of the collective of my experiences.

The creatures have life. They have ability to move and utilize it. A sticky residue is excreted as they move, leaving a trail of its meandering path. The trajectory is not definite in any one direction. These feeble beings attempt to navigate the cold, institutional space they inhabit. As one experiences agony, comfort and escape may be sought in the most obscure of locations, behaviors, or means. The inconclusive path relates to that sense of being lost and seeking something...anything.

It is my intent that some will see their own moments of agony within this work; excruciatingly grotesque and solemnly hopeful, even beautiful. Eliciting twinges of empathy and repulsion from these viewers, for they will have just seen another's most exposed, vulnerable moments fixed in time.



Figure 16: *Invert*. 2010. Installation view.

Other People's Stories: Inspirations & Influences

My work is heavily influenced by the commonalities within varied groups of individuals and by artists exploring corporeal manifestations of psychological existence. Research has led me to studies on subcultural groups and their relationships to their bodies. In this chapter, my focus will be sexuality, violence, and the body. Each of these issues evokes complex emotions, questions of power, feelings around vulnerability, awareness of existence, mortality and life. All seep into my artistic practice in varying degrees.

James Elkins writes, "The body can write on the skin from the inside—the soul, the mind, and the passions rise to the surface in boils, blushes, and rashes, and the invisible inside speaks by writing from the other side of the page"¹. The psyche can have a tremendous affect on one's physicality. Of particular intrigue is when one surpasses the body's natural processes to tell their stories of psychological trauma either on or through the use of one's body. The significance of wounding and injury has been studied in relation to S&M practices, body modification, cosmetic surgery, self-mutilation and self-injury. There are also forms of wounding that may have more positive connotations, such as tattooing or breaking the skin in an initiation or rite of passage ceremony. I explore the paths individuals choose as a way to connect the layers of meaning between the body,

¹ Elkins 1999, 47.

psyche and language; voices on the skin when the actual voice cannot be used. The practices explored here are seen as expressions of individual choice and agency, as transgressive, as positive ways to combat the norms of beauty practices, as ways to 'reclaim' the body after sexual violence, and as beyond meaning².

Transformative Processes

That which is generally referred to as self-mutilation in mental health literature comprises attacks on the skin or bodily organs such as eyes or genitals, usually conducted in private with the object of alleviating some mental distress³. Self-mutilation is overwhelmingly a behavior of girls and young women. The feminist approach places self-mutilation in private in the context of women's subordination and relates it to child sexual abuse. Jane Kilby states, 'It is important to note that self-harm can be understood more generally as a form of posttraumatic distress syndrome which will signal other known and unknown histories of trauma'⁴. 'It would seem that the act of harming one's own skin by cutting it up and tearing it apart speaks with a "voice" so sheer that it is virtually impossible for anyone to bear witness to it'⁵. Sarah Shaw also relates self-mutilation to childhood abuse: 'Studies abound linking childhood sexual and physical abuse and emotional neglect to the later development of self-injuring behavior'⁶. It is a common behavior. Marilee Strong estimates that two million young women in the US regularly

² Jeffreys 2008, 17.

³ Favazza 1996, 134.

⁴ Kilby 2001, 141.

⁵ Ibid., 124.

⁶ Shaw 2002, 193.

self-mutilate. It is to relieve the painful feelings associated with ‘trauma, violations, and silencing in a culture that fails to provide adequate opportunities for women’s development, healing, and expression’⁷.

Trauma & Photography

Catherine Opie is an American photographer known primarily as a portraitist who has gained media attention, as well as my own, for her depictions gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals. She successfully maintains her documentary perspective as both an insider and outsider within the communities she photographs. Her indelible self-portraits are of particular influence and provoke my own discomforts as well as the deepest empathy.

A natural provocateur, Opie confronts notions of society's tendency to superficially characterize an individual's identity and what also what defines identity. Before creating her affecting self-portraits, she created the portrait seen here which only portrait Catherine Opie has done where the individual's name is not divulged. The word “DYKE” is tattooed in capital letters across her neck. Her body's natural characteristics are evident: freckles sprinkled onto her skin, subtle curves of her shoulder blades and



Figure 17: *Dyke*. Catherine Opie. 1993.

⁷ Ibid., 201.

waist. In this image, the viewer is confronted with what we cannot see: her face, her chest, her sex. However, she tells the world “what” she is; it is always there without her ever having to face you.

The “really awful” of Opie's childhood frequently underpins her work. In “Violence: It's a Personal Thing,” Opie alluded to family secrets concerning violence perpetrated against a child and concluded, “trying to explain/learn from it/change it/it seems impossible/it's a personal thing.”⁸ The trauma of her childhood creeps into her photograph “Self-Portrait/Cutting”. Instead of using a word to identify herself, imagery is inscribed onto her back. A childlike rendering, carved into her skin, depicts two bloody stick figures in skirts holding hands.

They appear to be in front of their house with sweet, puffy clouds and a sun in the sky. This image was created after a failed relationship, when Opie yearned for domestic bliss that she had found so elusive. It is through her photographic medium that she is able to fix the moment of her present pain and have a marker to learn from and move forward.



Figure 18: *Self-Portrait/Cutting*. Catherine Opie. 1993.

⁸ Blessing and Trotman 2008, 16.

“I cut to see the pain that I’m in, to make visible my frustration.”
-Eliza⁹

Proudly affiliated with an S/M community, Opie created her next image out of anger with the mainstream gay culture's alienation of subcultural groups within the community during the early 1990s. She illuminates her continued perspective as both an outsider and insider. Chris Woods sees S/M as reflecting the damage suffered by gay men and lesbians from the ‘hypocrisy and hostility of society’. In the 1970s, he says, it was understood that people could suffer ‘internalized homophobia, self-hatred brought on people both by the horrors of external oppression and the requirements of an often-brutal scene’¹⁰. It became taboo to suggest that role playing and the ‘scene’ both arose from and reinforced the harm suffered from the oppression of homosexuality. The result is that ‘as an antidote to our communities’ failings, or as a badge of political nous, we encourage the pursuit of pain and abuse’¹¹. In “Self-Portrait/Pervert”, Opie shows the viewers her bravery and strength. For people outside of that subculture, it is a challenge. Opie said, “I like things that supposedly



Figure 19: *Self-Portrait/Pervert*. Catherine Opie. 1994.

⁹ Walsh and Rosen 1998, Figure 2

¹⁰ Woods 1995, 54.

¹¹ Ibid.

aren't within the norm. I have developed deviant sexual habits. So I like it that the word is so elegantly scripted on my chest. It's not like some kind of graffiti. The picture has an elegant gold and black backdrop. I wanted to push the whole realm of beauty and elegance, but also make people scared out of their wits.”¹²

In both of Opie's self-portraits she offers something deeply personal to the viewer. However, by hiding her face in each of the images, she does not show her emotional responses to the bodily trials. This factor ties the two images back to the photo entitled “Dyke”, implicating themes manifest in her work. She is addressing how identity is borne on and through the body and that the lesbian community's presence within the society is large¹³.

“Is it sometimes the pain inside has to come to the surface, and when you see evidence of the pain inside, you finally know you're really here? Then when you watch the wound heal it's comforting, isn't it?”¹⁴

Opie's history does not escape her next self-portrait that she created almost ten years after “Self-Portrait/Pervert”. Formally the images are connected, but “Self-Portrait/Nursing” does not exhibit any of the pain or anguish of the previous images. She holds her son, shows her face, and gazes at him with maternal appraisal. Yet, a scar of the word “pervert” appears on her chest. The



Figure 20: *Self-Portrait/Nursing*.
Catherine Opie. 2004.

¹² Ferguson 2008, 15.

¹³ Blessing and Trotman 2008, 73.

¹⁴ Character Lee Holloway, “Secretary,” 2002 Movie.

permanent mark on her flesh indicates her history, and the total image marks another point in her journey. Opie has seemingly transformed into a new life; one only possible as a result from the path leading up to that moment.

The Internal is External

From the point of view of skin, the world is a series of vaginations and pockets, with no meaningful way to distinguish what is inside from what is outside. We become the folds themselves and their contents become the world¹⁵. Artist Kiki Smith works with the human figure in a way which continually reminds of the events which have their own dynamics beyond our psychological and physical control. These events link any intellectual construction back to a process of life which cannot be governed by reason. Her utilization of references to bodily fluids being discharged blurs the lines between the inside and outside of the body¹⁶. Her work is at once beautiful, alluring, repellent, visceral, and macabre. It never fails to draw me in.



Figure 21: *Pee body*. Kiki Smith. 1992.



Figure 22: *Tale*. Kiki Smith. 1992.

¹⁵ Elkins 1999, 44.

¹⁶ Baltrock 1998, 9.

Smith chooses to work with the body as a subject “not consciously, but because it is the one form that we all share; it’s something that everybody has their own authentic experience with,” the artist remarked in 1990¹⁷. She uses the body as metaphor to consider the human condition and finds and exposes the vulnerabilities within them. To explore society’s dichotomies that split our culture apart and which need mending, Smith uses fragmented and broken bodies. She describes the dangers of patriarchal culture’s bias toward certain masculine qualities such as intellect and its consequence of alienating “us from the raw reality of physical experience”¹⁸. In these pieces, she attempts to heal the wounds by embracing human physicality, recreating inner organs, systems, and fluids.



Figure 23: *Untitled*. Kiki Smith. 1992.
Alternate View.



Figure 24: *Untitled*. Kiki Smith. 1992.

Smith’s representations of female bodies are acts of resistance. They refuse to act in a proper manner, or conceal what is usually hidden¹⁹.

¹⁷ Winters 1990, 132.

¹⁸ Posner 2005, 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Smith's exploration of the female body, its vulnerabilities, and examination of wounds, individual and cultural, resonates as I attempt to symbolically heal personal wounds. I aim to command the same aggressive attention, but maintain the sensitivity with which she handles the most delicate of human concerns. Her influence has further emblazed my efforts to effectively integrate both beauty and repulsion in my work.

Beauty, Normalcy, and Ugliness

Historically speaking normalcy is a concept that is inseparable from statistic. The statistical mean has been equated both with the moral and the immoral, the beautiful and the ugly, and it has been opposed to the "outlier," "the freak," the "sport," and the pathological. When normalcy is at stake, so is abnormality, and perhaps ugliness, beauty, and monstrosity²⁰. Each of us, I think, carries with us a continuously shifting mental schema of the relation between our own appearance and our notions of ugliness of beauty. Conditions such as anorexia and obesity and universal processes such as aging provoke an acute, ongoing negotiation of these terms.²¹

All of the artists investigated in this chapter address concerns with beauty, normalcy, and ugliness or repulsion. However, the artists Jenny Saville, discussed in the next section, and John Coplans bring these issues directly to the forefront of their work. Coplans began photographing his aging, nude form in 1984, shortly after he turned 60 years old. In efforts to remove all references to his "identity," Coplans left his head out of all the photos. He is the actor in these close examinations. The photographs use no props and he is set simply against a neutral background. Removing his face and other indicators

²⁰ Elkins 1999, 161.

of a narrative, he allows these images of his body to become any other person; they recall the memories of the human race. “Self-Portrait, Three Times” exemplifies his scrutinization of the body and self.

John Coplans' documentation of age is merely a representation of the body at a moment and acceptance of the physical facts of existence. His “Self-Portrait” image of his torso, along with all his others, challenges the idealized depictions from billboards and magazines. Society tells us that old age is ugly. This image of his torso, densely matted with hair, speckled with moles, and scarred and lined with age, denies any fear of one's physicality. He offers a humorous, reflecting, and disquieting sense of closeness in his observations.



Figure 25: *Self-Portrait Three Times*.
John Coplans. 1987.

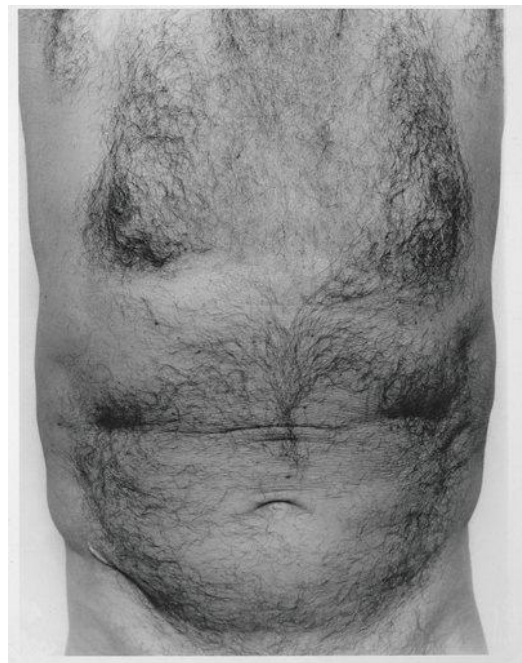


Figure 26: *Self-Portrait (Torso, Front)*.
John Coplans. 1984.

²¹ Ibid., 162.

Self-Mutilation by Proxy

Forms of cutting up the human body from piercing to leg amputation have become market opportunities in the present stage of consumer capitalism. Piercers and tattooists operate from high street shop-fronts putting in nipple rings and doing scarifications on the side. Surgeons carry out a range of form of cutting from cosmetic surgery to transgender surgery, and in some cases, these days, voluntary limb amputation²². Surgeons have become active participants in the contemporary widespread prevalence of self-mutilation. They act as facilitators in the now mainstream and profitable practice of cosmetic surgery, mostly on women²³. It has now become routine for some of the same surgeons to perform sex reassignment surgery. Those who cut women's labia to make them more socially acceptable, and tighten their vaginas for their husbands' pleasure, also create labia and vaginas for men who are transitioning to become women²⁴. The painter Jenny Saville has spent a good deal of time with people involved in cosmetic and sex-change operations and this is reflected in her paintings. From one angle her portraits of people in various phases of surgical reconstruction can be seen as showing them engaged in a project of self-realization. She paints individuals that try to reshape their bodies



Figure 27: *Passage*. Jenny Saville. 2004.

²² Jeffreys 2008, 15.

²³ Sullivan 2004, 6.

²⁴ Jeffreys 2005, 27.

because they resist the shapes their bodies have been given²⁵. Saville is concerned with violence and aims to show how violence that is suppressed in our humanist self-image returns to govern us. The effect of her work is to break up and tear apart notions of self-image.

In Saville's painting entitled "Plan," the paint on the figure is incised, not drawn on like the marks made before liposuction is done to you. She treats the lines like one would think of surgery, as cuts into the body. This image has many connotations, but of particular interest is the vulnerabilities there; of actually having liposuction. It also displays the tremendous amount of strength and power to take such ownership over one's body image. The ambiguous line she walks in her work is part of the power behind the paintings.



Figure 28: *Plan*. Jenny Saville. 1993.

Jenny Saville doses out a forceful, determined realism: a social snapshot. Danilo Eccher writes,

“In this case, the subject is that of an existentially pained society: the faces

²⁵ Gray 2005, 9.

of corpses killed in accidents, the flaccid bodies of decadent obesity, the carcasses of animals that scream out their “still life,” the painful sexuality of a disoriented identity. Subjects that crowd onto the canvas in a desperate need to tell their own story and freeze within a picture the chaotic flowing of life. They are faces swollen by pain and by the surprise of death. They try to retain the memory of an existence that is slipping away. Unknown faces, yet strangely familiar, giving evidence of private events that radiate out into disconcerting universality. The unseeing eyes of those who would encompass all reality with their last look. Eyes that look at you from the canvas, that capture you and drag you into the vortex of a tale in which there is no longer any intimacy or bashfulness.”²⁶

She questions the beauty of the mainstream. Seeing that beauty as what is associated with the male fantasy of beauty, she rejects the notion. In an interview, Saville remarks, “It's just what women think is beautiful can be different. And that can be a beauty in individualism. If there is a wart or a scar, this can be beautiful. It's part of your identity. Individual things are seeping out, leaking out.”²⁷ I take that notion to the point of experiences in life are a part of one's identity. The mundane, the unpleasant, the harsh, and the beautiful coalesce to form one's complex identity.

²⁶ Eccher 2005, 35.

²⁷ Sylvester 2005, 15.

Deception of Humor

Sue Williams first gained widespread attention in the art world for her aggressive and satirical, cartoon-like images of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Her paintings are filled with images and words based on her personal experience in abusive relationships and stories recounted to her by other abused women. Some critics dismissed this work as "victim art" while others applauded her tough-minded, feminist approach to these difficult issues²⁸.



Figure 29: *Some Ass*. Sue Williams. 2008.

She has changed her style since that time, abandoned the direct commentaries on violence, and takes a colorful and calligraphic approach such as in “Some Ass” or “American Enterprise.” Her work is a web of body parts—hands, feet, breasts, penises and all kinds of bodily

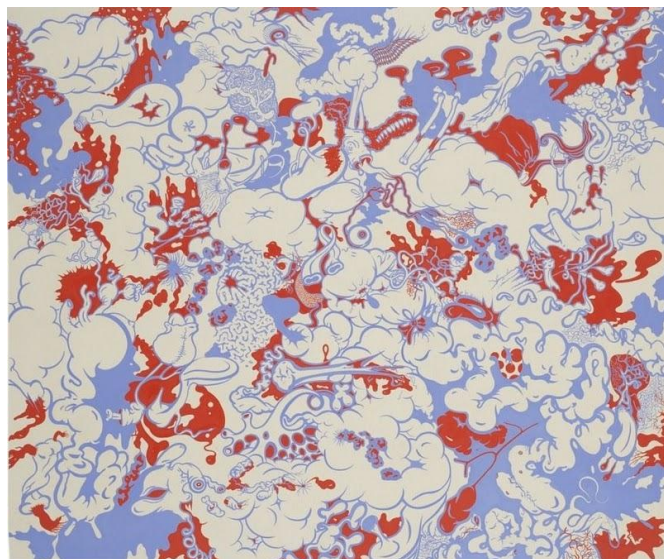


Figure 30: *American Enterprise*. Sue Williams. 2008.

²⁸ Albright-Knox Gallery Education Center, http://www.albrightknox.org/acquisitions/acq_2002/Williams.html.

orifices. Indirectly her work still reminiscent of the same issues of sexual violence, but Williams embraces a style which draws the viewer in through the curving, calligraphic lines and enticing colors. Her playful abstractions with intermingling male and female sexual organs and body forms are her tools to discuss the complexities of gender roles and relations. She uses the transgressive power of laughter and playfulness to blur the line between personal and public, opening her work to a wider audience.

I am drawn to the veiled truths in Sue Williams's work. As I tend to naturally gravitate to raw and aggressive imagery, her work expands my receptiveness to less direct paths of working. Potentially through a similar sense of humor, I can hope to expand my language and open my work to less explicit themes, maintaining clarity for myself and openness for my viewers.

The Entirety of Inspiration

I cannot begin to fully list all the artists, individuals, and overall influences on my work. It is my hope that the explored stories of these others further illustrates my train of thought during my graduate study. Others teach me so much more than I could ever hope to gain on my own while navigating the depths of my own murky mind.

Technical Information

Wall Skins

These pieces were created by attaching cotton cloth to the wall. Prior to attachment, the cloth was cut in a circular shape similar to the desired end result. String was threaded through points in the back of the cloth and allowed to hang as the cloth was attached to the wall. Using pin nails, the cloth was tacked to the wall and then stretched and pulled taut with the strings. Approximately 5 to 6 layers of a 70/30 glue/water mixture were painted onto the surface to stiffen the form. Once stiff, the nails were removed and the seams between form and wall were spackled and sanded to create the flush transition. The strings were clipped and the surface painted with the same paint used for the wall.

Poke Series

The clay used was a white earthenware body. The recipe is comprised of 15% grolleg, 20% EPK, 12% kona F-4, 28% frit 3124, and 2% bentonite. The bentonite must be added to warm water, mixed, and then added to the clay body. I also add nylon fibers for strength and to aid in the prevention of cracking since the forms were heavily manipulated and would cause this body to crack. It was fired to Cone 02, 2016°Fahrenheit.

Each piece began with wheel-thrown forms which were assembled intuitively. The orifices, or “pokes,” were small bowls that were inverted through tapping once they had dried past the point of being sticky to the touch, any drier and the manipulation was not possible. Holes were cut in the large forms to insert the poke and clay added to smooth the transition between the two. The folds were gained by adding coils and smaller wrinkles carved once the clay reached a leatherhard state. Forms that needed to fit in or onto any angles were built using slabs on an armature. The spherical forms were then cut to fit onto the armature and allowed to remain there until dry and ready be fired.

All work was fired in an electric kiln on a bed of sand for maximum warp prevention. However, some work warped and was repaired for the surface against which it needed fit with Loctite Epoxy Putty.

The first piece, entitled “Poke,” was surfaced with sprayed latex paint. All others, to achieve flesh tones, were painted with acrylic washes. There were between fifteen to twenty layers to achieve the depth of color. They were finished by covering with beeswax, paste wax, gel medium, or sprayed glue.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

- 2010 Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond,
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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2009 Instructor of Record, Summer Semester, Virginia Commonwealth
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- 2007 Teacher's Assistant, Summer session, Interlochen Center for the Arts,
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 ▪ Ceramics (Hand-building & Wheel-throwing)
- 2006-2008 Art Teacher, George Washington Carver High School, Columbus, Georgia
 ▪ Beginning through Advanced Drawing, Painting, Ceramics, and 2D & 3D
 courses.
- 2006 Student Teacher, Columbus and Hardaway High Schools, Columbus,
 Georgia
 ▪ Intro to Art, Drawing & Painting I, Printmaking I, Drawing & Painting II,
 Ceramics & Pottery II, Advanced Studio Art I, Preparing a Portfolio, AP
 Studio Art.
- 2005-2006 Public Relations Officer, The Collective, Columbus State University,
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EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 Absent Queer Body, Capital One Gallery, Chesterfield, Virginia
Invert, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Virginia
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- 2009 The Art of Fine Craft, Elder Gallery, Nebraska Wesleyan University,
Lincoln, Nebraska
The C Word, Metro Gallery, Richmond, Virginia, Group MFA Candidacy
Exhibition
- 2008 Leap, FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond,
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- 2007 Faculty & Staff Exhibition, Interlochen Center for the Arts gallery,
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- 2006 Transition, Solo Senior Exhibition, University Hall, Columbus State
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- 2003-2006 CSU Annual Student Juried Exhibition, University Hall, Columbus State
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AWARDS/HONORS

- 2009 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University
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Edward Shorter Art Endowment Fund Scholarship, Columbus State University
European Council Study Abroad Scholarship, Valdosta State University
Who's Who Among American Colleges and Universities, Columbus State University
- 2003 Dean's List, Columbus State University
Edward Shorter Art Endowment Fund Scholarship, Columbus State University
Regents Study Abroad Scholarship & Stipend, Columbus State University
Art Student of the Year, Columbus State University